

March 6, 1969

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MEMORANDUM FOR: Honorable William P. Rogers
Secretary of State

FROM: Henry A. Kissinger

SUBJECT: Probable Reactions of Various Parties
if the Viet Cong Headquarters (COSVN)
is Struck by a U.S. B-52 Raid

Attached for your eyes only is the CIA analysis
discussed this morning.

Attachment

ARMY review
completed.

ON-FILE NSC RELEASE INSTRUCTIONS
APPLY

NSA review completed

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ASSUMPTIONS

Within the next few days, a force of about 50 B-52's bombard the Communist base area in which the Communists' primary Field headquarters -- the Central Office for South Vietnam (COSVN) -- is located. The strikes against COSVN hit those portions of the base areas involved which lie on the Cambodian side of the frontier as well as those portions lying within South Vietnamese territory.

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I. PERTINENT BACKGROUND FACTORS

1. The Physical Nature and Shifting Location of COSVN. The Communists field command and control headquarters, COSVN, is difficult to pinpoint because it and its several components are spread out over a large area. Furthermore, the military high command -- formerly referred to as COSVN's Military Affairs Section and now called, simply Headquarters, South Vietnam -- is located in an area near to, but separate from that generally inhabited by COSVN itself. Both COSVN and its military component have been fixed numerous times (usually by radio direction finding efforts) in the general Tay Ninh Province/Cambodian border area known as the "Fishhook." The enemy's extensive use of split terminals, however, coupled with his security practice of siting radio transmitters some distance from the command units they serve, make it almost impossible to pinpoint the current location of either major headquarters with any great degree of precision.

2. Over the past several months, both COSVN itself and its subordinate Military Headquarters have generally stayed within the areas outlined on the attached map. From 19 November 1968 through 4 March 1969, COSVN has ranged through an area approximately 19 kilometers long and 8 kilometers wide straddling both sides of the Cambodian border. Precisely where within this area COSVN's major components are now located, we do not know. From 15 November 1968 through 4 March 1969, the Military Headquarters has generally ranged through a roughly 6 by 18 kilometer border-straddling area slightly to the west of COSVN proper. Again, we do not know just where within this area the Military Headquarters is now located. Thus the chances of doing major damage to either COSVN or its Military Headquarters are highly uncertain.

3. The Relevant Cambodian Physical and Human Geography. COSVN itself, together with the nearby (and probably associated) Communist Base Area 352, is located in a sparsely populated border area, though there are a few Cambodian villages in the vicinity as well as Cambodian border security troops. The separate Military Headquarters area (plus its nearby and probably associated Base Area 353) begins only about six miles south of Mimot, a large Cambodian plantation town, and Route No. 7, a major Cambodian road which runs through Mimot and leads to Snoul and the northeast.

4. The Likelihood of the Fact of Such an Attack Becoming Generally Known. There is practically no chance that word of these attacks on Cambodian soil would not quickly become known around

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the world. The Communists would find ways to put out the news, if Sihanouk did not do so first or if it did not leak from the allied side. The U.S. could, of course, maintain that any bombs which fell on Cambodia had been the result of navigational errors, but the weight of the attack would make this a difficult position to sustain.

II. PROBABLE CAMBODIAN REACTIONS

5. Sihanouk appears presently inclined to warm up his relations with the U.S. and to be responding positively to current U.S. diplomatic initiatives. Hence these attacks would come at a delicate juncture in U.S. - Cambodian relations. He might not want to publicize the affair, but various factors (including personal "face") will probably compel him to denounce the U.S. in shrill and strident terms. Unless the U.S. gives him a public apology, he might even then proceed to publish his private correspondence from President Nixon and add duplicity to his list of specifications and charges against the U.S.

III. PROBABLE VIETNAMESE COMMUNIST REACTIONS

6. Hanoi will almost certainly see to it that the attack becomes public knowledge. It is too good a propaganda opportunity to let pass, and it is a further means to obstruct any improvement in relations between Washington and Phnom Penh.

7. However, a single attack, regardless of its effectiveness, is unlikely to alter in any major sense Hanoi's strategy for conducting the war or the Paris talks. No doubt the Communists expect the U.S. to retaliate in some way for the resumption of rocket attacks on Saigon. They must have undertaken the current "offensive" on the calculation that there would be a risk of U.S. retaliation. Apparently, they have been willing to accept these consequences in return for the potential psychological and political gains of regaining the "initiative" and demonstrating their ability to continue the fighting at high levels. Indeed, they may even be trying to confront the U.S. with the dilemma of retaliating in a major way and taking the adverse political pressures engendered by "U.S. escalation" or of not retaliating and thus exacerbating tensions between Saigon and Washington.

8. A single B-52 raid on COSVN, would not seem to Hanoi a major retaliation, even though it involved an attack on their Cambodian sanctuaries. The Communists would probably suspend judgment on whether this represented a single episode, or the beginning of a new American policy. If there were no further strikes against Cambodia, Hanoi would judge that U.S. policy was constrained by concern for

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public reaction to widening the war or resuming attacks against the North. On the ground, however, they might prudently move critical facilities closer to major Cambodian population centers.

9. It is highly unlikely that a one-time strike against COSVN would lead to the permanent breakdown of the Paris talks. If Sihanouk mounted a major and sustained political offensive against the U.S., Hanoi and the Front might feel obliged to stage a temporary walk out to support him.

IV. PROBABLE SOVIET REACTIONS

10. The Soviets could be expected to give full public support to whatever line Hanoi chose to take. Privately, the Soviets would probably advise Hanoi to exploit the U.S. move politically rather than to risk renewed escalation. But we believe that Hanoi would make its own decisions, and we further believe that Moscow would support whatever decisions Hanoi made.

11. In private approaches to the U.S., the Soviets would warn that the U.S. move would enlarge and prolong the war, and lead to a breakdown of the negotiations at Paris. Moscow would also indicate that the U.S. course prejudiced the climate for bilateral U.S.-USSR exchanges on other matters of mutual interest. They would ^{urge} ~~wage~~ that the U.S. not only refrain from further acts of escalation but also make some move at Paris to get the negotiations in motion. But they would probably not undertake any threatening or diversionary move of their own.

V. PROBABLE CHINESE COMMUNIST REACTIONS

12. Peiping, like Moscow, will almost certainly soon be apprised of the full extent of the postulated attacks, whether or not they are publicized. Peiping will certainly join any denunciatory chorus and will probably urge Hanoi to riposte with increased military pressure. Peiping will probably also use the fact of the attacks as an argument in its continuing effort to persuade Hanoi to forswear the "revisionist" road of political negotiations in favor of the "correct" path of all-out struggle.

VI. PROBABLE WORLD-WIDE REACTIONS OF OTHER PARTIES

13. When the full scope of the attacks becomes generally known, there will probably be world-wide expressions of concern over the prospect that the war is again escalating. The U.S. Government will certainly be charged (at home and abroad) with unwarranted

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actions jeopardizing chances for peace, etc., especially since it would be difficult to demonstrate in a publicly convincing manner that a major VC headquarters in Cambodia was the target of the attacks. The longer term impact on world opinion will be determined by the subsequent political and military actions of all parties involved in the Vietnam struggle.

VII. PROBABLE SOUTH VIETNAMESE REACTIONS

14. If the U.S. publicly announces or acknowledges that we have struck some of the VC's Cambodian sanctuaries, general South Vietnamese morale would be lifted. This lift, however, could soon turn sour (particularly in the face of continued Communist harassment of population centers) if the belief spread that the U.S. was offering sanctuary strikes as a substitute for retaliation against North Vietnam.

15. In any event, the GVN's key leaders would presumably be apprised of the full scope of the targets struck, and those made witting would be gratified and heartened to see at least some key Cambodian sanctuary areas lose their inviolate virginity. Given the continuing Communist attacks on Saigon and other South Vietnamese population centers, however, the GVN's leaders would regard the postulated attacks -- by themselves -- as an inadequate emotional or political substitute for retaliation against North Vietnam. Whatever be the facts of the matter, if President Thieu and his key associates infer or conclude that these attacks are being offered as a substitute for attacks against North Vietnam, their always present (even if sometimes latent) doubts about U.S. constancy and determination will be increased. Such concerns were unquestionably fanned by the most recent rocket attack against Saigon. If such attacks continue, these concerns will loom very large in GVN leadership eyes, particularly if the U.S. does not retaliate at least with continuing attacks against Cambodian sanctuaries.

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